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A resource in response to contemporary challenges to liberal democracy?

de Leeuw, Sijfra; Bourne, Angela

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# Explaining Citizen Attitudes to Strategies of Democratic Defense in Europe: A Resource in Responses to Contemporary Challenges to Liberal Democracy?

Sjifra E. de Leeuw <sup>1</sup> and Angela K. Bourne<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands; <sup>2</sup>Institute for Social Science and Business, Roskilde University, Denmark

## Abstract

It has long been speculated that banning parties from participation in elections may be counterproductive because it might provoke societal resistance. Using the European Social Survey (2002–2010;  $N = 195,405$ ), our study suggests otherwise. We demonstrate that party bans enjoy the legitimacy of majority support. This holds true irrespective of countries' resilience to extremist influences (or lack thereof) resulting from "institutional intolerance," electoral entry barriers and authoritarian legacies. Individual orientations toward the democratic establishment do matter to a small extent: citizens with authoritarian tendencies and low system support are less supportive, while this is less so for citizens with extremist ideological orientations. Even though party bans entail significant democratic dilemmas, this study reveals societal resources supportive of repressive responses to extremist parties.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In his famous appeal against fascism in 1937, German émigré Karl Loewenstein warned that democracy may become the "Trojan horse by which the enemy enters the city" (1937, p. 424). The Nazis' rise to power in Weimar Germany has provided the

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sjifra E. de Leeuw, MSc, Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, Box 15791, 1001 NG Amsterdam, Netherlands. E-mail: [s.e.deleeuw@uva.nl](mailto:s.e.deleeuw@uva.nl)

<sup>1</sup>The Github repository containing the replication code for this study is: <https://github.com/sdleeuw2/Replication-Code-Explaining-Citizen-Attitudes-to-Strategies-of-Democratic-Defense>

paradigmatic case of political extremists overthrowing democracy under the ruse of respecting legality. Since then, various democracies have recalled these tactics to justify militant responses to political extremism, including association bans and the criminalization of offensive speech acts (see, e.g., [Bleich, 2011](#); [Capoccia, 2005](#); [Downs, 2012](#)). By far the most repressive measure is banning political parties from participation in elections, or “party bans.” Even though justified as measures to defend democracy by those supporting bans, party bans challenge principles of political tolerance and undermine the level playing field of electoral competition. In addition to these normative dilemmas, one of the prime arguments fielded against their use is that they do more harm than good, among other things because they might provoke societal resistance ([Bleich, 2011](#), pp. 101–103; [Downs, 2012](#), p. 48). Societal resistance includes radicalization, and increased voter support and/or electoral success for extremist parties. Party bans are therefore typically approached with caution.

Party bans are an infrequent, but not unusual phenomenon in Europe. In an expert survey of party ban practices in 37 European democracies, [Bourne and Casal Bértoa \(2017\)](#) show that the majority of these countries banned a party at some point during the post-war period and that in total 52 parties were banned. Prominent party ban cases include: the German Socialist *Reichspartei* (1952) and the Communist Party (1956); *Sinn Fein* (1956) in Northern Ireland; the Dutch Centre Party ‘86 (1998); *Batasuna* in Spain (2003); the Belgian Flemish Block (2004); and the Workers Party in the Czech Republic (2010). Combined, these events have ignited public and scholarly interest in the consequences of party bans. Nevertheless, no study has assessed citizen attitudes toward party bans. This is an important shortcoming, given that academics, political elites, and the media have warned that party bans may be counterproductive because they might provoke societal resistance.

Research on citizen attitudes provides knowledge on whether elite positions on an issue as fundamental as who is permitted to contest political power enjoys the legitimacy of citizen support. It also permits us to reflect on whether potential costs in terms of societal resistance outweigh potential benefits such as the reaffirmation of democratic values. To this end, we ask: to what degree is the public divided over the use of party bans? And does opposition to party bans vary in accordance with countries’ resilience to political extremism and individual orientations toward the democratic establishment? We address these questions by analyzing opinion data from the European Social Survey (ESS;  $N = 195,405$ ) between 2002 and 2010 in 27 European countries. Although not subjected to analysis before, questions on attitudes to party bans have been regularly posed in ESS. First, we map the aggregate levels of support for party bans in European countries, after which we explain this support in function of country and individual characteristics.

## Theory and Hypotheses

### Militant Democracy and Party Bans

After the Second World War, European democracies faced the question of how to protect the democratic order against extremist influences. One answer was found in the literature on “militant democracy.” First coined by [Loewenstein \(1937\)](#), militant democracy entails the protection of democratic freedoms by pre-emptively curtailing the rights of those trying to subvert it, for instance, by means of antiracism legislation or association bans ([Bleich, 2011](#); [Bourne, 2018](#); [Capoccia, 2005](#); [Downs, 2012](#)). By far

the most repressive measure is banning a party from participation in elections, thereby partially or fully excluding it from the public sphere.

In addition to the normative dilemmas surrounding their implementation, party bans spark controversy because they might provoke societal resistance. In this respect, it is often argued that this potential cost should be taken into account along with two other pragmatic considerations, namely, how capable a country is of defending itself against, and recovering from, extremist successes (i.e., resilience), and which types of citizens oppose bans (Minkenberg, 2006).

### Countries' Resilience to Extremist Influences

Citizen support for party bans should first be weighed against countries' ability to defend themselves against, and recover from, extremist influences. One important source of resilience is constraints on the ability of extremist parties to reach positions of political authority. In this section, we theorize how different dimensions of resilience influence public support for party bans.

**Institutional tolerance toward political extremism.** One of the principal contributions by legal scholars to the literature on democratic defense is the construction of typologies of legal-constitutional responses (see Fox & Nolte, 2000). The "procedural model" draws on Schumpeter's (1947) conception of democracy and holds that parties' legitimacy is derived from their electoral support, which limits public authority to restrict extremist views. Legitimacy in "substantive democracies," by contrast, draws on Mill, Rawls, Popper, and others in its insistence that rights should not be used to abolish other people's rights. Parties that support the abolition of other people's rights can therefore be denied access to the electoral realm.

There is an extensive literature linking public opinion to institutional traditions. Most notable is the "representative model of judicial decision making," which states that the behavior of legal institutions can be attributed to the environment in which they operate (Cook, 1977; Gibson, 1980). If this is the case, institutional commitments to "open debate and competition among all ideological factions [even extremist ones]" (Fox & Nolte, 2000, p. 200) in procedural democracies is the result of a wider societal consensus that no voices should be excluded. In substantive democracies, institutional willingness to curtail the rights of political extremists should follow a wider societal commitment to maintaining conditions for cultural tolerance. In light of these arguments, we expect that:

*H1: Citizens living in "substantive democracies" are more supportive of party bans than citizens living in "procedural democracies."*

**Authoritarian legacies.** Many have also linked historical experiences of authoritarianism (e.g., Nazism, fascism, and Communism) to countries' resilience against extremist influences. Such arguments are often inspired by the paradigmatic case of German "militant democracy" (Backes, 2006), in which the legacy of Nazism justified the implementation of constitutional provisions aimed at marginalizing extremist influences. In some comparative studies, this observation has been generalized into the argument that the deep-seated traumas these regimes left behind resulted in strong institutional pressures to create a definitive rupture with the past (Downs, 2012, p. 106; Klamt, 2007, p. 154).

The relation between authoritarian legacies and public support for party bans, however, is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, work by some scholars (Bourne, 2012; Bourne & Casal Bértoa, 2017) suggests that party bans are more frequently deployed in situations where they are likely to be met with societal resistance. This is especially the case in new democracies, where a substantial share of the population may still support authoritarian forms of government. In this context, party bans may serve as a necessary but contentious instrument to eliminate the remnants of authoritarianism. We can therefore expect that:

*H2a: Citizens living in countries with recent experiences with authoritarianism are less willing to support party bans than citizens living elsewhere.*

On the other hand, in established democracies with past experiences with authoritarianism the traumatizing records of the past may underpin a convincing narrative that helps to justify the necessity of militant measures (de Leeuw, Rekker, Azrout, & Van Spanje, 2019). Support for party bans in these countries may therefore be higher than elsewhere. We therefore expect that:

*H2b: Citizens living in countries with distant experiences with authoritarianism are more supportive of party bans than citizens living elsewhere.*

**Electoral entry barriers.** If an antisystem party can be kept from exercising a meaningful role in parliamentary or governmental arenas, it is likely that citizens will not consider it sufficiently threatening to warrant a ban. Among the most potent tools to prevent extremist parties from exercising any power whatsoever is the manipulation of electoral rules. The entry barriers resulting from these rules, then, would serve as a viable alternative to party bans.

Evidence for such considerations can be found in debates about banning the German *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) in 2017. The Federal Constitutional Court ended up rejecting the ban—among other things—because the 5% legal threshold for parliamentary representation resulted in a limited electoral showing of this party, thereby limiting its threat to the democratic order (Bourne, 2018, pp. 140–141). A more general reasoning has been made with respect to the proportionality of electoral systems, with highly proportional systems enabling the election of small (radical) parties. A key example is the French *Front National* (now National Rally), which performed well under a system of proportional representation but lost its momentum after the reintroduction of a majoritarian system (Downs, 2012, pp. 65–66). This makes party bans more desirable in countries with highly proportional systems, like Israel, but less so in the United States, with its plurality system (Navot, 2008, p. 747; Pedahzur & Weinberg, 2004, p. 118).

If extremist parties experience difficulties gaining electoral ground, it is plausible that citizens feel less inclined to identify political extremism as a realistic threat. In addition, citizens living in countries with low electoral barriers are more likely to have witnessed extremist parties in the electoral and parliamentary arena. This, then, may reinforce the perception that it is necessary to curb extremist influences by means of legal measures. We therefore expect that:

*H3: Citizens living in countries with low entry barriers for electoral representation are more supportive of party bans than citizens in countries with high barriers.*

## Individual Orientation toward the Democratic Establishment

A second point requiring further scrutiny is the question of which types of citizens oppose party bans. In this section, we theorize that citizens with more negative orientations toward the existing democratic order are also the least supportive of party bans.

**Authoritarian tendencies.** Several studies on “authoritarian socialization” propose that citizens are less supportive of democratic government—and by extension of measures designed to protect it—when they grew up in a context where authoritarianism is promoted as a viable form of government (Neundorff, 2010; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017). Authoritarian tendencies may then continue throughout individuals’ lifespans, because the ideas acquired during preadulthood tend to remain stable afterwards (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). Therefore, it is plausible that citizens who grew up under authoritarian rule are also less willing to support measures designed to protect democracy. In line with these arguments, we expect that:

*H4: Citizens socialized under authoritarian rule are less supportive of party bans than citizens socialized thereafter.*

**Ideological extremism.** Another possibility is that support for party bans is steered by strategic considerations, an idea borrowed from earlier research on elite strategies of exclusion. Van Spanje (2010, p. 356), for instance, argues that mainstream parties are less likely to ostracize parties with similar ideological convictions, since they may be potential coalition partners. On the other hand, Müller (2005) suggests that parties may benefit from bans against ideologically proximate parties, because they are most likely to attract their contenders’ supporters in subsequent elections. In a similar vein, it can be argued that citizens’ support for party bans is influenced by strategic considerations. That is, it is plausible that support is lowest among citizens whose ideological preferences are most likely to be restricted by means of a ban, that is, citizens maintaining extremist beliefs. We can therefore expect that:

*H5: Citizens with extreme right- and left-leaning ideological orientations are less supportive of party bans.*

**System support.** Support for party bans is also likely to be linked to individuals’ system support in two ways. First, the implementation of party bans typically requires the involvement of various institutions, including governments, parliaments, and the judiciary as the final arbiter. However professional they may be, public officials may be steered by various motivations, some of which may be related to their partisan alignment. This means that citizens’ belief in their ability to make adequate and appropriate decisions on this topic comes down to whether they believe public officials live up to moral standards, such as impartiality and integrity. Second, system support also reflects individuals’ support for law compliance (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Citizens with high system support, and by extension high adherence to norms of law compliance, have lower levels of tolerance toward those challenging the legal status quo and may be more willing to implement measures to prevent them from doing so. We therefore expect that:

*H6: Citizens with high levels of system support are more supportive of party bans.*

## Data and Methods

### Data: European Social Survey

To test our hypotheses, we use all waves of the ESS (2002–2010) containing a measure of support for party bans (2002–2010). To our knowledge, this is the only cross-national dataset that includes such a measurement. To ensure that all models in our analyses include the same countries, we restrict our analyses to the 27 countries for which we have information about their previous experience with party bans and their institutional tradition. Data were collected through a representative random sample of the population (aged 15 and up), using face-to-face interviewing techniques. This resulted in a sample of 195,405 respondents in 27 countries with an overall response rate of 70%.

### Dependent Variable: Support for Party Bans

Support for party bans was measured by asking respondents to what degree they agreed with the statement that “parties wishing to overthrow democracy should be banned,” ranging between 1 “completely agree” and 5 “completely disagree.” This was subsequently recoded to a 0–4 scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of support. Given the specificity of this question, this single item should suffice to draw conclusions with respect to support for party bans.

### Independent Variables

**Country-level variables.** To identify institutional tolerance toward political extremism, we use data compiled by [Bourne and Casal Bértoa \(2017\)](#), pp. 234–236). These scholars distinguish between procedural democracies, with high levels of tolerance toward extremism, and substantive democracies, with low levels of tolerance. Second, we use the data outlined in the work of [de Leeuw et al. \(2019\)](#) to distinguish between countries that experienced democratic transition (a) in the first half of the 20th century, (b) in the 1970s, and (c) around the 1990s. Countries with a largely uninterrupted experience with democracy since the turn of the century were considered “democratic legacies.” Finally, we use the presence of electoral entry barriers to operationalize the difficulty for parties to gain a seat in parliament. Given our emphasis on the visibility of smaller parties, we include a measure that captures the impact of all types of electoral entry barriers, namely, Gallagher’s Least Square Index ([Gallagher and Mitchel, 2005](#)). High values on this index indicate that smaller parties have been unsuccessful at breaking through the electoral threshold, while lower values suggest that parties’ seat and vote share are similar. The full overview of country-level variables can be found in [Supplementary Appendix Table A](#).

**Individual-level variables.** To test individual legacy-effects (i.e., socialization under authoritarian rule), we leverage within-country variation in individuals’ birth year. All respondents who turned 18 under authoritarian rule were considered socialized by that regime. We use the traditional left-right self-placement scale (ranging between 0 “left” and 10 “right”) to construct a categorical variable for ideological extremism: far-left (0–1 on the original scale), center left (2–4), center (5), center right (6–8), and far-right (9–10). Third, we focus on political trust as a diffuse form of system support. To

Table 1.

*Summary Statistics Variables*

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean/Percent	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Support for party bans	195,405	2.67	1.15	0	4
Auth. socialization : During	53,176	53.01		0	1
After	47,131	46.99		0	1
Ideology: Far-left	9,341	5.38		0	1
Center-left	46,872	27.00		0	1
Center	57,649	33.21		0	1
Center-right	49,864	28.72		0	1
Far-right	9,865	5.68		0	1
Institutional trust	191,791	5.13	2.60	0	10
Age	194,453	47.4	18.24	13	123
Period: Wave 1	36,364	18.61		0	1
Wave 2	39,041	19.98		0	1
Wave 3	36,321	18.59		0	1
Wave 4	40,987	20.97		0	1
Wave 5	42,692	21.85		0	1
Gender: Male	92,350	47.32		0	1
Female	102,821	52.68		0	1
Years of education	193,415	12.19	4.04	0	56

Source. ESS 2002–2010.

Note. Table only includes respondents for whom we had information regarding their attitudes to party bans (the dependent variable).

this end, we constructed a mean scale of five routinely used items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.895$ ), measuring individuals' trust in the parliament, the judiciary, political parties, the police, and politicians. All items ranged between 0 "no trust at all" to 10 "complete trust." In addition to these variables, we control for gender, educational attainment, age, and the wave of the survey. All individual-level variables are summarized in Table 1.

**Analysis strategy.** Our data implies at least three possible sources of clustering, namely, countries, waves, and each country-wave combination. Not taking this clustering into account would substantially increase the chances of making a Type I error. To tackle this challenge, we follow the recommendations made by Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother (2015). In keeping with their recommendations, we perform multilevel analyses with individuals strictly nested in country-wave combinations, country-wave fixed regression coefficients and country-waves cross-classified with countries and waves.

The sole exception to this rule are the models evaluating the difference in support between citizens who grew up under authoritarian rule or thereafter. This is challenging because it is statistically difficult to disentangle socialization or "cohort" effects from the potentially confounding influences of age and period. A rich literature collected under the umbrella term "age-period-cohort" analysis resolves this issue by imposing informed constraints on the specification of these variables in order to reduce the



correlation between them. We use a method proposed by [Kritzer \(1983\)](#) which deals with this problem by constraining age effects to be linear and period effects to be fixed.

To facilitate a comprehensive and substantive reading of the results, we report bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs). These intervals are based on an artificially created sampling distribution, comprised of random samples with replacements drawn from the original sample. The lower and upper bounds of these intervals denote the lowest and highest plausible values of the parameter. Rather than relying on the crude practice of interpreting p-values (which we do report), we consider a hypothesis fully supported when the sign of both the upper and lower bound are in keeping with our expectations. Finally, we center all variables around the country-mean.

## Results

### Mapping Public Support for Party Bans in Europe

To what degree is the public divided over the use of party bans? And does this mirror elite responses to political extremism? [Figure 1](#) visualizes the distribution of support for party bans in countries where in the past elites have responded to extremist parties by implementing a ban, and in countries where this is not the case.

[Figure 1](#) demonstrates that in virtually every country, citizens supporting the implementation of party bans are in an overwhelming majority. This ranges between 50% of support in Norway and 85% in Cyprus. This is surprising, given the severely repressive nature of this measure. The second largest share are citizens without a clear opinion about party bans, which may be attributed to conflicting feelings on, or a general unfamiliarity with, this topic. This means that overall, the percentage of respondents against party bans is marginal, with 32% opposed in Norway and 5% in Cyprus. In addition, support for party bans does not seem to mirror elite responses to extremist parties. Support for party bans is high, irrespective of whether or not countries have banned a party in the past. This suggests that public opinion has not influenced elite responses, nor the other way around.

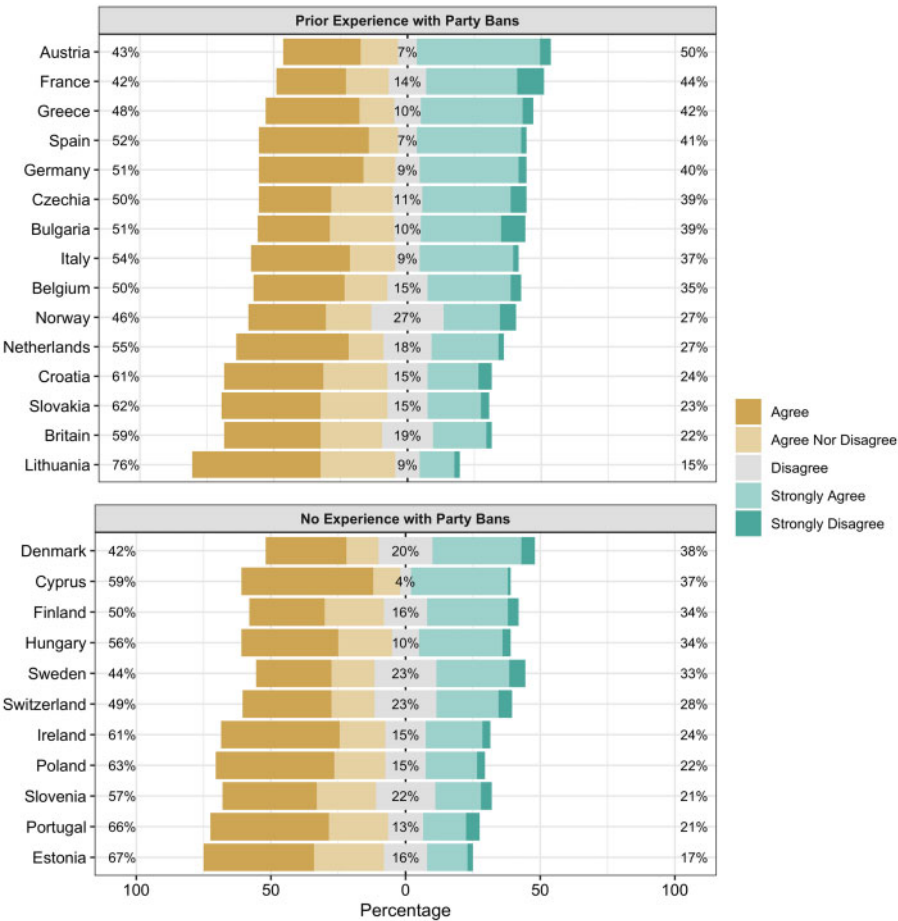
### Explaining Support for Party Bans

Before evaluating the country-level hypotheses, we first ask how much variation there is in support for party bans between countries. An inspection of the intra-class correlation of an intercept-only model reveals that only 3.87% is located at the country-level while the remaining 96.13% of the variation can be ascribed to individual characteristics. When it comes to the evaluation of country-level hypotheses, this finding means that—even when significant—the effects are admittedly marginal in terms of size. By contrast, the overwhelming share of individual-level variability is rather promising for our individual-level hypotheses.

**Countries' resilience.** With only 3.87% of the variance located at the country-level, there is little reason to expect that country-characteristics have a substantial impact on individuals' support for party bans. To be sure, we estimated a series of analyses with country-level predictors. The results are displayed in [Table 2](#).

Model 1 evaluates whether support for party bans mirrors patterns of institutional tolerance toward extremist influences. We expected that support would be higher in

Figure 1.  
*Distribution of support for party bans by country.*



Source. ESS 2002–2010.  
Note. Figure contains a summary of the responses to the question to what degree respondents agreed with the following statement: “Parties that wish to overthrow democracy should be banned.”

countries with high levels of institutional intolerance (i.e., substantive democracies) than elsewhere (Hypothesis 1). Although the effects flow in the expected direction, the analyses provide little statistical support for this expectation. Not only are the differences insignificant, the upper bound of the CI suggests that they are minor at best, with the highest plausible value indicating that citizens in substantive democracies are 0.345 (6.90% of the scale) more supportive than in procedural democracies. In other words, there is little reason to believe that higher institutional commitment to excluding extremist voices is also reflected in a higher societal commitment.

In Model 2, we investigate whether support is lower in new democracies with recent experiences with authoritarianism (Hypothesis 2a) and higher in established

Table 2.  
*Explaining Support for Party Bans Using Country Characteristics*

	Model 1: Institutional tradition		Model 2: Authoritarian past		Model 3: Electoral barriers		Model 4: Pooled	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI
Tradition:								
Substantive	0.154	[−0.034, 0.345]					0.057	[−0.146, 0.282]
Authoritarian Past:	(0.091)ns						(0.104)ns	
1940s			0.385	[0.126, 0.674]			0.362	[0.083, 0.666]
			(0.134)**				(0.143)*	
1970s			0.238	[−0.035, 0.529]			0.217	[−0.082, 0.535]
			(0.131)ns				(0.142)ns	
1990s			0.002	[−0.184, 0.181]			0.015	[−0.176, 0.196]
			(0.091)ns				(0.094)ns	
Proportionality					−0.041	[−0.245, 0.144]	−0.004	[−0.102, 0.011]
					(0.005)ns		(0.007)ns	
Controls								
Age	0.383	[0.351, 0.415]	0.367	[0.334, 0.399]	0.383	[0.351, 0.415]	0.367	[0.334, 0.399]
	(0.016)***		(0.016)***		(0.016)***		(0.017)***	
Gender: Female	−0.001	[−0.010, 0.009]	−0.004	[−0.014, 0.006]	−0.001	[−0.010, 0.009]	−0.039	[−0.014, 0.006]
	(0.005)ns		(0.005)ns		(0.005)ns		(0.005)ns	
Education	−0.276	[−0.352, −0.194]	−0.234	[−0.303, −0.156]	−0.276	[−0.352, −0.194]	−0.234	[−0.303, −0.156]
	(0.039)***		(0.041)***		(0.039)***		(0.041)***	
Intercept	2.583	[2.476, 2.697]	2.556	[2.416, 2.689]	2.640	[2.525, 2.747]	2.561	[2.385, 2.721]
	(0.053)***		(0.068)***		(0.057)***		(0.080)***	
ICC (%)	3.413%		2.937%		3.646%		3.046%	

Source: ESS 2002–2010.

Note: Standard Errors between parenthesis. Entries are the result of a multilevel analysis with individuals exclusively nested in country-waves and country-waves cross-classified with countries and waves. CIs are calculated using bootstrapping with 10,000 iterations (seed = 1).  $N = 195,405$ . CI = confidence interval; ns = nonsignificant.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

democracies with more distant experiences (Hypothesis 2b) than elsewhere. The data provide little support for Hypothesis 2a. The CI shows that the opposite claim, namely, that support is higher in recently transitioned countries, is equally as plausible as Hypothesis 2a. Even more so, the low value of the upper bound suggests that even if there were a difference, it is minor at best (6.90% of the scale). We do find some support for Hypothesis 2b, with citizens in countries with distant experiences with authoritarianism (transition in the 1940s) being significantly more supportive than those in countries with a democratic legacy. The uncertainty of this estimate means that this difference can be very minor (2.52% of the scale), to substantial (13.48%). Although insignificant, a similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to countries that transitioned in the 1970s. Combined, these findings suggest that distant experiences are associated with higher levels of support for party bans, while recent experiences do not result in lower levels of support.

Model 3 evaluates whether support is higher in countries where extremist parties have a greater chance of breaking through the electoral threshold, which is the case in highly proportional systems (Hypothesis 3). Countering our expectations, the data provide more support for the opposite hypothesis, namely, that higher levels of proportionality are accompanied by lower levels of support for party bans. Even if we were to find a positive effect, the impact of proportionality is admittedly low, with the highest plausible difference between countries with the lowest and the highest levels of proportionality being 0.144 (2.88% of the scale). This shows that citizen support for party bans is not steered by the chances that extremist parties gain electoral ground.

Combined, the analyses confirm the conclusion drawn before, namely, that support for party bans varies little—if at all—in function of countries' resilience against political extremism. Substantively, this implies that party bans are not perceived as more or less legitimate in democracies where they may be most needed.

**Individuals' orientation toward democratic establishment.** With 96.13% of the variance located at the individual-level, individual predictors may yield much more promising explanations for support for party bans. The results of the individual-level analyses are displayed in Table 3. We begin this section with the estimation of an age-period-cohort (APC) analysis, which allows us to evaluate whether citizens who grew up under authoritarian rule are less supportive of party bans than citizens who grew up thereafter (Hypothesis 4). The results depicted in Model 5 provide some support for this hypothesis. Citizens who grew up under authoritarian rule are significantly less supportive of party bans than citizens who grew up thereafter. This difference, however, is relatively minor, with the highest plausible difference being 0.054 points (1.08% of the scale). Authoritarian tendencies therefore seem to matter, but only to a very small extent.

Second, we expected that individuals whose ideological views are most likely to be restricted by means of a party ban—that is, those with extremist ideological views—are less supportive of such measures (Hypothesis 5). Model 6 demonstrates that extremist orientations are not linked to lower levels of support for party bans. Instead, far-right citizens are slightly but significantly more supportive of party bans, while far-leftist citizens are no less supportive than centrist citizens. This suggests that there is some relation with left-right orientation but not with ideological extremism. Citizens therefore appear to be supportive of party bans, irrespective of whether their preferred ideology is more likely to be targeted by one.

Table 3.  
*Explaining Support for Party Bans Using Individual Characteristics*

	Model 5: Authoritarian tendencies		Model 6: Ideological extremism		Model 7: System support		Model 8: Pooled	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95% CI
Socialization: After Ideology: Far left	0.028 (0.012)*	[0.003, 0.054]					0.025 (0.013)*	[0.003, 0.053]
			−0.008 (0.013)ns	[−0.035, 0.017]			−0.035 (0.016)*	[−0.065, −0.005]
Center left			0.006 (0.007)ns	[−0.008, 0.023]			0.020 (0.010)*	[0.002, 0.038]
Center right			0.031 (0.007)***	[0.017, 0.046]			0.035 (0.009)***	[0.014, 0.054]
Far-right			0.061 (0.013)***	[0.035, 0.086]			0.074 (0.016)***	[0.042, 0.103]
System support					0.193 (0.020)***	[0.154, 0.232]	0.314 (0.028)***	[0.254, 0.370]
Age	0.316 (0.033)***	[0.255, 0.396]	0.410 (0.018)***	[0.372, 0.445]	0.381 (0.016)***	[0.349, 0.415]	0.343 (0.026)***	[0.286, 0.423]
Gender: Female	−0.003 (0.007)ns	[−0.017, 0.011]	−0.003 (0.006)ns	[−0.014, 0.008]	−0.001 (0.005)ns	[−0.011, 0.009]	−0.011 (0.008)ns	[−0.026, 0.002]
Years of education	0.052 (0.054)ns	[−0.052, 0.157]	−0.312 (0.043)***	[−0.396, −0.226]	−0.308 (0.039)***	[−0.379, −0.233]	0.058 (0.059)	[−0.053, −0.164]
Period: Wave 2	−0.001 (0.012)***	[−0.136, −0.002]					−0.011 (0.026)***	[−0.135, −0.089]
Wave 3	−0.071 (0.012)***	[−0.082, −0.037]					−0.062 (0.014)***	[−0.089, −0.038]
Wave 4	−0.059 (0.012)***	[−0.082, −0.037]					−0.045 (0.013)***	[−0.072, −0.012]
Wave 5	0.102 (0.012)***	[−0.124, −0.079]					−0.083 (0.013)***	[−0.111, −0.057]
Intercept	2.679 (0.050)***	[2.559, 2.792]	2.618 (0.049)***	[2.527, 2.717]	2.547 (0.048)***	[2.449, 2.665]	2.499 (0.062)***	[2.368, 2.621]
ICC (%)	3.900%		3.637%		3.665%		4.093%	

Source: ESS 2002–2010.  
Note: Standard Errors are placed between parenthesis. Entries are the result of a multilevel analysis with individuals exclusively nested in country-waves and country-waves cross-classified with countries and waves. CIs are calculated using bootstrapping with 10,000 iterations (seed = 1). *N* = 195,405. CI = confidence interval; ns = nonsignificant. \*\*\**p* < .001, \*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05.

Finally, we theorized that antisystem sentiments results in lower support for party bans (Hypothesis 6). Model 7 suggests that of all individual level predictors, system support by far has the strongest effect on support for party bans. While still relatively minor in terms of size, the findings suggest that citizens with the highest levels of system support are 0.148 points more supportive (2.96% of the scale) than citizens with low levels of trust. This shows that citizens' confidence in institutions involved in the implementation of bans to some degree influences their support for party bans.

Altogether, there appears to be some support for the idea that individual orientations toward the democratic establishment affect support for party bans. More remarkable, however, is how little these attitudinal predictors explain. This is especially surprising given the amount of variance located at the individual level. This means that societal polarization over the use of party bans is very limited and that support is high even among segments of the population that are theoretically the most likely to oppose such practices.

## Discussion

Party bans are the most repressive instrument for curtailing extremist influences in democratic societies. They do so by undercutting the resources and legitimacy of these groups. Nevertheless, it has long been speculated that such exclusion measures may also be counterproductive as they might provoke societal resistance (e.g., Bleich, 2011; Downs, 2012). Although this argument has repeatedly been made in academic, elite and media discussions, we know remarkably little about citizen attitudes to party bans. Analysis of citizen attitudes allowed us to reflect on (a) whether party bans enjoy the legitimacy of majority support and (b) whether the potential benefits outweigh potential costs in terms of societal resistance.

In spite of the recurring concerns among elites regarding the possible societal resistance against the use of party bans, our study clearly showed that party bans enjoy the legitimacy of majority support in every country. Contrary to our expectations, we found little evidence that countries' resilience against extremist influences—resulting from institutional intolerance, historical experiences with authoritarianism, and high electoral entry barriers—matters. Instead, support is approximately equally high in countries that are prone to extremist influences as in countries that are not. These null-findings are important, because they suggest that support for party bans is widespread. This means that, where threats to liberal democracy emerge, the option of party bans is not likely to be counterproductive if elites judge that the weight of normative argument falls in favor of party bans. In keeping with our expectations, we found some support for the idea that citizens with more negative orientations toward the democratic establishment, such as those with authoritarian tendencies, extreme ideological orientations and low system support, are less supportive of party bans. Nevertheless, even though limited support for democracy is theoretically the most viable reason to oppose party bans, there is surprisingly little difference in support between citizens with negative orientations and that of citizens with positive orientations.

Combined, our findings suggests that one important condition favoring implementation of the contentious process of party bans is likely to be met everywhere in Europe. More specifically, it satisfies the theoretical requirement that when framed as a democratic threat, party bans will be able obtain sufficient popular support, despite the

gravity of the measure (Bourne, 2018; Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998). Our findings show that there is overwhelming support for party bans in all countries, even if they are prone toward extremist influences. Even more so, the limited differences in support for party bans between citizens with negative and positive orientations toward democratic establishment shows that this measure is less likely to be contested or result in societal polarization than commonly assumed. Even citizens with more negative attitudes toward democracy seem to be favorable to measures designed to protect it. Second, these findings enable us to identify new conditions favoring the implementation of party bans. Our finding that citizens socialized under authoritarian rule are significantly less supportive suggests that long-term processes of democratization may alter levels of support for party bans and thus the likelihood that they be implemented if judged appropriate and necessary.

One limitation of this study is our focus on a single-item dependent variable. This measure falls short in three respects. First, the measure specifically gauges support for antidemocratic parties, a group of parties that is relatively marginal and only has limited impact on the electoral playing field. Second, this measure does not address some of the most important contemporary challenges to liberal democracy, such as the upsurge of anti-immigrant, radical right, populist parties. These new challenges often take on the form of parties promoting or implementing “democratic backsliding,” where democratic institutions are weakened rather than overthrown altogether. This means that individuals’ response to this question may be at least partly shaped by their conception of what overthrowing democracy entails. Finally, it is important to note that this item focuses on one instrument of democratic defense, thereby making generalizations to other widely employed instruments, such as hate speech legislation, unwarranted. In light of these methodological shortcomings, it is clear that further research is needed to examine the validity of our findings in relation to other instruments of militant democracy, although we are unaware of any other cross-national surveys examining such measures.

In addition to this methodological limitation, it is also important to stress the theoretical shortcomings and avenues for future research. Although our study provides novel and informative insights in how support for party bans is distributed, it remains exploratory. As such, we have been unable to address important topics such as how processes of “democratic slippage” affects support for party bans. This is important because studies in the literature on political tolerance have observed that “slippage” often occurs between generally high support for principled protection of fundamental rights and less tolerant attitudes invoked when confronting specific instances of extremism (Gibson, 2013; Lindner & Nosek, 2004). Direct application of this concept to party bans is admittedly complex, given that bans’ highly repressive nature blurs certainty about whether support is a measure protecting or undermining civil liberties. Further experimental research designed to uncover differences between principled support for party bans and political tolerance in specific instances could help address this point.

The “democratic backlash” observed in countries such as Hungary and Poland shows striking similarities with tactics of “legal revolution,” with democratically induced constitutional changes aimed at weakening fundamental democratic institutions. The strong electoral support for these politicians suggests that there is sufficient ambiguity about their democratic credentials. It is therefore unclear whether such high levels of support for banning “extremist” parties may carry over to such cases. At the same time, the effects of “democratic backsliding” and illiberal judicial reforms, over

the long term, may undermine support for banning parties if they entail increasing sympathy for proto-authoritarian forms of “managed democracy” or a loss of support for democratic establishment. These are additional questions for further research.

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### Supplementary Data

[Supplementary Data](#) are available at *IJPOR* online.

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### Biographical Notes

**Sjifra de Leeuw** is a PhD researcher in Political Communication and Journalism at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

**Angela Bourne** is an Associate Professor at the Institute for Social Science and Business at Roskilde University in Denmark.